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Reagan, Congress face off over giving military aid to Nicaraguan 'contras'

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The Sandinistas just don't go away.

Once again Washington is facing a dilemma over what to do about the entrenched and increasingly repressive Marxist government in Nicaragua. President Reagan wants to step up pressures on the regime. The politicians in Congress are uncertain.

As the administration prepares to ask Congress to resume military aid to the rebels, or "contras," fighting the Sandinistas, these will be factors in what is expected to be an intense debate:

- Despite infusions of nonmilitary United States aid, the contras are in disarray. And, while the Sandinistas cannot wipe them out, without direct US military aid the contras cannot be turned into a force capable of defeating or dictating its terms to the regime.
- The government in Managua grows more oppressive. But the contras have not ended their own human rights violations or provided a political plan of what they would do in the event they came to power. The rebels also remain deeply divided.
- The Contadora diplomatic process is stirring again. The so-called Contadora group — Colombia, Mexico, Venezuela, and Panama — together with Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, and Peru, have called for "a Latin American solution" to the conflict and an end of

US support for the contras. The five Central American nations recently endorsed the call.

President Reagan has approved the broad outlines of a plan to seek a resumption of military aid to the contras, White House officials indicate. Pending further soundings on Capitol Hill, the administration has not officially put a dollar figure on the aid or said when and how it will present its request to Congress. According to press reports, Mr. Reagan will ask for up to \$100 million, about two-thirds of this for military aid.

Last year the Congress turned down the President's request for continued covert aid to the contras. Instead, it voted \$27 million for medical supplies, food, and other humanitarian aid, which expires in March. The rebels are now calling for more assistance.

The House has never voted for lethal aid for Nicaragua and is unlikely to do so, congressional sources say. But if the President weighs in with an artfully crafted request that stresses humanitarian assistance but allows some wiggle room for military aid, House lawmakers might go along. For it may be politically difficult in an election year to appear to be rejecting the President and siding with the Sandinistas.

"The administration's trying to figure out just how far they can go," says one congressional source.

Whether the administration will seek overt lethal assistance for the rebels or a further rollback of the restrictions on use of Central Intelligence Agency funds is not clear. There, in fact, appears to be no precedent for providing overt US military aid to a rebel force.

A little publicized amendment to last year's aid bill removed the prohibition on use of CIA contingency-reserve funds for sharing intelligence with the rebels and training them in the use of communication equipment. Giving tactical advice, however, is prohibited.

The House majority is unequivocally opposed to providing military assistance to the contras. In a letter to Mr. Reagan last week, Rep. Michael D. Barnes (D) of Maryland, chairman of the subcommittee on Western Hemisphere affairs, suggested that the President's present policy left only two choices: Either the US would have to abandon the contras and sustain a foreign policy setback, or it would have to get directly involved militarily.

"Providing lethal military aid for the contras would lead us one step further toward that dead-end choice," wrote Mr. Barnes. He urged the President to back the Latin American countries seeking a diplomatic solution of the conflict.

Doubts about renewing military aid exist in the Republican-controlled Senate as well. Richard G. Lugar, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, sees this as the year of decision — with the US either going all-out in support for the contras or dropping its backing altogether. While there is more sympathy in the Senate for helping the contras, concern is growing that the insurgents continue to engage in violent acts against the population.

As the debate unfolds, critics of administration policy say, the Congress and public should be asking whether or not present US policy is working. Yet the debate tends to get cast in terms of whether legislators are for or against the leftist Sandinistas.

Reagan is determined to turn up the pressure on the Sandinistas. He is also trying to block a \$60 million farm loan to Nicaragua from the Inter-American Development Bank.

But Central America experts fault the administration for having no clear strategy in Nicaragua. The amount of aid flowing to the contras is insufficient, they say, and the rebels are poorly trained and have failed to broaden their political base.

"So the policy is ineffectual," says Robert Leiken of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.